

## Studying Abroad: Things to Know

Living and traveling beyond the borders of your familiar territory is challenging but deepens your understanding of cultural differences and similarities. This information is to help you prepare for your exchange experience and inform you of the guidelines that you must follow during your time as an exchange student. If you have questions please contact Pam Graham, the International Exchange Program Coordinator at the Lake Champlain Waldorf School.

### **1. Cultural Adjustment**

When a student is thinking about making an exchange there is a tendency to assume that there will be very few or no problems making a transition to another culture. Some students do adjust quickly and relatively easily. For others, the process is longer and there are rocky turns along the way. Most students can and do adjust and therefore gain valuable life experience that will broaden their perspective and help them to be successful adults in a multi-cultural society. Students should understand they carry with them beliefs, attitudes and ideas that are formed as a result of growing up in their home culture. Before and during the first weeks of an exchange experience, the students, their parents and host families tend to minimize how much these unconscious and conscious inner pictures can affect communication, the desire to learn a new language and participation in a new culture. Even students who have traveled extensively or gone through culture shock in a different setting are not immune. Families and individuals who need to move frequently for work have developed techniques to move through these low points in adjustment (it can last for days or a few weeks) but everyone who moves to a foreign culture experiences it to some degree.

*What is culture shock?* It can be described as a feeling of disorientation. Think of how well you understand the unspoken and spoken messages of your daily life. When you move to a different culture you may not immediately understand how to greet someone in a hallway at school, when to share personal information, how to talk on the telephone, or what to wear to a party. It is exhausting to consciously figure everything out. It would be similar to saying each step of brushing your teeth out loud and checking and double-checking to make sure that you were doing it in the right order. Most people say that just listening takes two or three times the regular amount of effort.

The positive aspect of culture shock is that it means that you are perceptive enough to see the differences between cultures. If you are perceptive to the differences, you can understand them, although it may take a serious amount of effort.

*What are the signs of culture shock?* It is not always easy to understand why you feel a little withdrawn or just plain unhappy. One of the most common signs of culture shock is to blame the host culture or your host family for the discomfort that you may be feeling. This can get much worse if you participate in conversations that have the theme of "How weird and different everything is here" or "Isn't the food disgusting?" or "Why are they so picky about ... (cleaning,

curfews, homework, knowing where I am all the time?" - take your pick and fill in the blank). This sort of "mutual support for complaining" conversation is not going to help your adjustment.

Some common **psychological** reactions are -

Over concern for safety  
Crying, feeling like crying  
Challenging authority figures/rules  
Feeling overly dependent  
Being hostile or irritable  
Idealizing your home country  
Withdrawing from social activity  
General boredom and loneliness  
Stereotyping of host's nationality

Some common **physical** reactions are-

Slight illnesses - headaches etc.  
Excessive sleeping  
Change in normal eating amount  
Extreme fatigue

You can count on having some of these reactions but if you are having several and they last longer than a week, please talk to your host family or the foreign exchange coordinator at your school.

### **Common Stages of Cultural Adjustment**

There are distinct stages of cultural adjustment that virtually everyone who lives abroad goes through (no matter where they come from and no matter where they go to).

Initial Euphoria - Most students are incredibly excited when they are preparing to go on an exchange and this positive mood and the high expectations that come along with it carry them through the first few days or weeks. Everything seems new and exciting and the similarities seem to stand out. The newly arrived student feels like "people are really very much alike." When there is a feeling of being letdown from this excitement, the first stage is over.

Hostility and Irritability – The focus changes from focusing on the similarities to the differences between the student's culture and the host culture. These differences seem to be everywhere and the smallest things are blown out of proportion. This is when a student might find themselves irritated by the host mother insisting that the cleaning be done "her way." This is the stage typically known as culture shock.

Adjustment Beginnings - The corner turns on this crisis and head towards recovery. This happens gradually as the student starts to understand cultural clues and the language becomes easier. The student begins to feel that they like this new place and their sense of humor begins to return.

Adjustment and Biculturalism – The student finds customs, foods, and ways of doing things that they enjoy. The student acclimates to the point of being able to function in two cultures. At this point the adjustment period is coming to an end and sometimes the student will experience a bit of *reverse culture shock* when returning home.

### **Moving through Culture Shock**

Other people can help but mostly the student determines the pace of the cultural adjustment. The sooner the student takes some positive actions towards feeling better, the faster the adjustment will be made. It is helpful to remember that -

- Virtually everyone has some signs mentioned above and has some amount of culture shock.

The student needs to be mindful that their reactions can be a lot more emotional than usual in the first few weeks. Remembering to give this transition time helps students through and learn a lot in the process.

- It is invaluable to try to keep a sense of humor. Students can make light of their mistakes and others will laugh with you and not at you.

- Make goals for certain activities at the beginning of your adjustment period. For example: plan a trip to the grocery store by yourself. If you find yourself not wanting to go out you may have to force it at first - make yourself go to the post office to mail a letter, speak to someone new at school (even just a greeting), suggest an outing with your host family like a walk or a picnic. You may feel that learning a new language is impossible. If so, set some goals for language every day, e.g. reading for one half hour, listening to the radio or even just learning one new word or expression each day.

- Find new friends from your host culture - other students may be shy to approach you; part of this can be the difference in language. You may have to be the one that starts a conversation or suggests an activity. Ask someone to help you with your homework or go to a sporting event

*The satisfaction that you feel after successfully meeting all of the challenges of living in a different culture, accommodating yourself to another family and studying in another school is priceless and a tremendous accomplishment. Whether you make an exchange to enhance your college applications, broaden your personal horizons or simply for a change, you will find that the experience deepens your perspective and makes you more sensitive to global issues and connections.*

## **2. Cultural Sharing**

You may not realize it at first but you will be the closest thing to an ambassador of your country that your host family and school will ever see. They will form the majority of their opinions about your country through their interactions with you. You can be certain that they will expect you to be able to speak intelligently about your country's position on everything from NATO to welfare to availability of health care to current political situations. You can also be asked to explain past actions of your country. US citizens should be prepared to answer questions about Vietnam, poverty and perceptions about "American imperialism." Europeans will be asked about health care, World War I and II, and public transportation.

Prepare a little bit before you go by reviewing history (some students bring a small book with them) and reading the newspapers. Make sure you understand the basics of the past political relationship between your home country and your host country. You could just respond with a blank stare and "I don't know anything about history" or "Our President takes care of all that" but you will look rather dim-witted if you do. In most parts of the world people are very well informed about history and politics. In some parts of the world it is life saving information.

How many of the following questions could you answer about your home country?

- Are you expected to bring flowers to someone's home when invited? Do certain flowers have certain meanings?
- If, as a customer, you touch or handle something in a store, will the storekeeper assume you are buying? Inconsiderate? Knowledgeable? Outside your rights?
- How is the day usually scheduled? When are meals eaten? Is there a daily rest period? When is the customary time for visiting friends or talking on the phone?
- Is military service compulsory?
- Is public transportation available? Is it used by all economic classes?
- Who has the right of way in traffic? Vehicles, Animals, People?
- What is the predominant religion? How are members of less-predominant religions considered?
- How are drinking and gambling considered?
- What is typical for health care in terms of relative cost and availability?

- What percentage of people own homes, what percentage rent? How much does a house cost for a family?
- What is the educational system?
- Are there specific do's and don'ts for a stranger?

Hopefully you can answer a lot of these questions about your host country when you return.

### **3. Dating**

Young people all over the world do this, but in ways that are determined by their culture and class. It is probably best to avoid dating until you are very sure of what is acceptable. Dating can work out in almost any country but if you give out certain messages your partner may think you are proposing marriage, ignoring him or her, or being insulting. You can expect your social life to be more closely supervised than at home. Don't take this as a sign that they don't trust you; they are responsible for you and trying to live up to their responsibilities.

Every student participating in an international exchange needs to know and understand the risks of sexual activity prior to their departure. This responsibility lies with the student and their parents.

### **4. Dress**

When you are in a situation where everyone knows you it is less likely that you will be judged by how you dress. When you are an exchange student you are unknown to almost everyone that you meet and how you dress will become more important. We ask that exchange students dress on the more modest and conservative side. In general this means that jeans are ok (they are universal for teens all over the world) but revealing shirts are not. In some parts of the world females do not expose their shoulders or too much of their thighs and males would not be seen without a shirt on. Also be sensitive that if you wear a lot of brand name clothing you could be exposing yourself to unnecessary risk. Nike tennis shoes, Levi's and an Adidas jacket are expensive items in most countries. Watch what you bring - expensive watches and shoes scream loudly to unsavory characters. Dress anonymously in big cities.

### **5. Early Return**

There are different types of Early Return. There is *Voluntary Early Return* when a student wants to come home early and his or her own parents agree. There is also *Involuntary Early Return* - this occurs when the exchange coordinator (after consultation with natural parents, host parents and school) decides that a student should be removed from the exchange and returned to his or her home country. As you read through this information you will understand which actions can cause *Involuntary Early Return*. The host school and home school reserve the right to consider Early Return for behaviors and incidents that are not listed in these guidelines.

If a student is sent home early or is considered "out of the exchange" for any reason, there can be no readmittance to the exchange. The costs for transport home will be higher as the return airline ticket date will need to be changed and these costs must be completely paid by the natural parents.

### **6. Driving and other dangerous activities**

Exchange students are not permitted to drive any type of vehicle, motorcycle, moped, tractor or snowmobile. This policy applies even if a student has an International Driver's License or the

host family thinks that it is ok. Violators of this policy will be considered for Early Return. If a student drives there is no limit to the extent of the student's liability in case of damages or injuries.

The host school and home school may permit some activities that are judged to have an element of danger if permission is given by both natural parents in writing before the activity will take place. The host school, home school and the host family must be released from all responsibility during the time the student is participating and evidence of adequate insurance coverage be supplied to the home school and host school. Certain outdoor activities, rock climbing and river rafting etc. could be considered in this category. Check with the international exchange coordinator first.

## **7. Alcohol**

Students are expected to follow LCWS student handbook rules while abroad. Any use or abuse of alcohol may lead to consideration for Early Return. Parents are responsible for coming to an agreement with the host family and their child regarding alcohol use during non-school time.

## **8. Drugs**

Students that are participating in an exchange may not buy, sell, possess or use drugs that are illegal in their host **or** home country. Violators of this policy will be immediately considered for Early Return. A verified violation normally includes physical evidence, student admission of usage or reliable witnesses who have seen the student using drugs. Do not stay at a social situation where there is drug use.

Legally you are under the jurisdiction of the country you are in. Laws vary widely all over the world. In some countries penalties are severe and include pretrial detention for months or years (you stay in jail while waiting for trial), presumption of guilt unless proven innocent, and lengthy prison sentences without parole. Many countries do not permit bail in drug-offenses. Do not carry a package or go across a border for someone else - you may unexpectedly become a drug trafficker. There are 4500 US citizens in jail on drug related charges around the world. The top five countries where they are in jail are Mexico, Germany, Canada, Jamaica and Great Britain.

## **9. Employment**

Most exchange students visit the host country with a student visa that does not permit employment. If you are interested in working (on a casual or part-time basis) you will need to research the laws of your host country and abide by all applicable laws.

## **10. Expenses**

Your host family offers basically food and lodging. You should be prepared to pay for personal items such as books, clothing, shampoo as well as school trips or camps. Please understand that the host family may have planned a vacation before they knew you would be living with them and you may stay with another host family while they are on vacation.

## **11. Health Insurance**

Students must have adequate medical and accident coverage during the time of their exchange. This coverage must also include emergency evacuation. Students must know how to access their health coverage in a different country.

## **12. Manners**

When getting to know a country and its people it is important for the student to practice good manners for that country. At the beginning it will probably feel more formal than one is used to. The student should ask their host family what is considered polite and take cues from others. After being in the host country for a while, one develops a sense of comfort with social interactions. Before traveling, it helps to read about intercultural communication.

## **13. Religion**

Exchange students should not be pressured in any way in regards to religion or religious practices. It is hoped that the visiting student will be respectful and understanding of a host family's religious beliefs and participate in their religious practices as a part of cultural learning. This may include saying blessings before meals, attendance at religious services or special events. Participation by the visiting students cannot be made mandatory and the visiting student is also free to continue their own religious practices.

If there is a concern in this area please contact the international exchange coordinator at your host school.

## **14. School**

The student is required to attend the Waldorf high school that has agreed to host him or her. Repeated absences are a reason for consideration for Early Return. After an initial period of adjustment for language and cultural differences, a student is expected to achieve an average level of work in all classes. After the adjustment period, poor motivation, unsatisfactory work, or inappropriate behavior may be cause for Early Return.

## **15. Travel**

When a student is participating in an exchange, the host school and home school need to have knowledge of your location, to help ensure your safety and encourage your full participation in host family and school events. Some travel would interfere with these goals. All travel needs to be approved in advance by the exchange coordinator at the host school and in some situations by the host and home schools.

## **16. Telephone and Computer Use**

The student needs to fully integrate into the culture of the host family and the country. We ask that calling home or friends be kept to a maximum of 10 minutes per week. Computer and email use should be kept to a maximum of 30 minutes per week.